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LANGUAGE CONTACT AND THE GENESIS OF  
MISHNAIC HEBREW

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## LANGUAGE CONTACT AND THE GENESIS OF MISHNAIC HEBREW

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My topic begins from the fact that at the end of the Second Temple period, in the first century CE, there were apparently two varieties of Hebrew in use in the Holy Land. They take their names from the central corpora which use them: Biblical Hebrew (BH) and Mishnaic Hebrew (MH), although these varieties are not limited to those corpora. In the post-Second Temple period, MH continued to be used, but BH was not. Both varieties are Hebrew, and therefore have much in common; but they are clearly distinct from each other, with many obvious differences at all levels of grammar, in phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. So my question is this: Why and how did two distinct varieties of Hebrew come about? Since BH seems to be the original and older variety, where did MH come from to replace it?

This question has been addressed before, but no single answer is agreed upon at present. I cannot provide in this lecture an in-depth review of previous research, but in brief I will begin with a few answers that have been given.

### *Previous Views*

*(1) BH died during the Exile, and MH is a later rabbinic invention based on it plus Aramaic*

This view is actually the earliest put forward, namely, that MH was created as an artificial scholarly language out of BH—or more precisely out of the Hebrew Bible itself—whose language was no longer spoken by rabbis whose mother tongue was Aramaic. This was proposed by Abraham Geiger (Geiger 1845). Geiger believed that Hebrew had ceased to be a spoken language after the Exile and was replaced by Aramaic; but for religious reasons, Jewish scholars developed a *Gelehrtensprache*, which was used for religious discussion and was not anyone's first language. The discontinuity between BH and MH is due to this.

Almost all of the views that follow may be understood as reactions and counter-proposals to Geiger. Most notably Moses Segal (1908, 1927) raised convincing objections, pointing to various features of MH which derived from neither the Bible nor from Aramaic, as well as grammatical phenomena that were unlikely to occur in any but a spoken language. This view found dramatic mid-twentieth century

confirmation in the manuscript discoveries in the Judean Desert, which, among other things, have yielded documents in MH (or a dialect close to MH)—letters, contracts, and a list of buried treasure—that by no stretch could be attributed to rabbinical language-making abilities.<sup>1</sup> Any theory of MH that considers it anything other than a “real” language is untenable.<sup>2</sup>

## *(2) BH is not the parent language of MH*

Some scholars believe that MH does not actually come from BH; as Moshe Bar Asher puts it, “it is not a matter of two successive stages of the language, but of two different synchronic systems, reflecting two different dialects” (1992, quoted in Perez Fernandez, 8). This view argues that MH is as archaic as BH (see Perez Fernandez, *ibid.*), and here the answer fails, in my opinion. The proponents point to a small number of features that are debatably archaic (such as the rel. pron.  $\psi$ ),<sup>3</sup> but overlook the vast number of typologically older traits found in BH, at all levels, including, for instance, the verbal system. This view tends to ignore the question of how MH came to be.

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<sup>1</sup> Recent works on these texts—most notably the Bar Kokhba letters and legal texts from the caves not associated with Khirbet Qumran—include the following: M. O. Wise, *Language and Literacy in Roman Judaea: A Study of the Bar Kokhba Documents* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Martin Abegg, Jr., J. E. Bowley, and E. M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Concordance, Volume 2: The Non-Qumran Documents and Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); and Uri Mor, עברית יהודאית: לשון התעודות העבריות ממדבר יהודה (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 2016). The Copper Scroll (3Q15), the list of buried treasure, although its date is uncertain, is probably the earliest extant document in Mishnaic Hebrew.

<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the view of MH as “artificial” is still held by some scholars, especially by those who believe that Hebrew ceased to be spoken after the Exile. Ingo Kottsieper, for instance, refers to post-exilic Hebrew “religious lingo” that developed within Judaism during a period when Aramaic was the only language in daily use (Kottsieper 2007). Such a view is an atavism that does not deal seriously, in my opinion, with post-Exilic and post-Biblical language or literature. Hebrew, of some kind, was the first language of some Jews until the 2nd century CE, and possibly later.

<sup>3</sup> Other traits that have been mentioned are: the feminine singular demonstrative pronoun  $\text{זֶה}$  rather than  $\text{זֹאת}$ , the form of the third feminine singular perfect ending in final-weak verbs (e.g.,  $\text{עָלָה}$  rather than  $\text{עָלְתָה}$ ), and the singular construct  $\text{לַיְלָה}$ , “night.”

*(2a) BH and MH are regional (sister) dialects*

Gary Rendsburg (1992) has put forward the view, a variation of the previous view, that the origins of MH are in the old pre-exilic Northern Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> He too claims that BH is not the “parent language” of MH, but they are sister dialects that both came to be used within Judaism at a later period. This view, in turn, depends on the idea that MH shares diagnostic features with pre-exilic “Northern Hebrew.” On this view, the differences between MH and BH are contemporaneous regional variations. Rendsburg claims that Northern Hebrew was maintained after the Assyrian conquest in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and survived to become the language of the Galilean Tannaim in the second century CE—a period of almost a millennium in which there is no attested use of Northern Hebrew or of Mishnaic Hebrew as a regional language, while the very beginnings of MH as an identifiable dialect are found instead in Judah, in 4QMMT, the Copper Scroll (3Q15), and the Bar Kochba correspondence and related texts. The geographical theory, too, must be set aside.

*(3) BH is the parent language of MH*

I assume therefore that BH and MH are related diachronically, that BH is the parent language of MH. But the germ of truth carried forward from the other view is that this parentage is not straightforward, the transition from the earlier to the later stage was not smooth. There is more in the genetic material of MH than just BH, as we shall see. BH has to share parental rights with another language.

*(3a) BH is older, and this explains the difference*

It might be assumed that time alone explains the difference between the two varieties.<sup>5</sup> Languages do change greatly over time. The gradual accumulation of changes can alter a language out of all resemblance to its predecessors. However, the steady accretion of internal changes, and the uneven operation of analogy and sound change, often have the effect of making a language *more* complex over time, while many of the most important changes in MH, as we shall see, make it *less* complex. Something more is at play here than just chronology. That “something more” is contact with other languages, principally Aramaic.

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<sup>4</sup> A view adumbrated by Segal (1927). For a more recent version of Rendsburg’s view, see Rendsburg (2012).

<sup>5</sup> Chomsky refers to MH as having “evolved” out of BH (1951: 212).

*(4) BH and MH differ in social function*

MH is often described as originally a spoken language or a vernacular, while BH is described as a literary language only. I agree that this is most likely the case for the very end of the Second Temple period, namely the 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE and CE. Some suggest that this functional division of labour also obtained throughout the entire Second Temple period, which is possible, and even may have existed in pre-exilic times, an idea I reject. In any case, if BH was always and only a written language, after the Exile or before, and never spoken, as is sometimes claimed, then MH as a vernacular could not have emerged from it. However, the clear signs of diversity in BH argue against its early fossilization as a purely literary language that had no spoken varieties. If BH was in some sense the parent language of MH, then MH must have emerged before any spoken–written dichotomy developed, even granting some degree of standardization of BH. It is this emergence of MH and its background that I am interested in.

*(5) MH developed from BH through widespread acquisition by native Aramaic speakers*

My argument picks up on a grain of truth in Geiger’s original formulation: I do think that MH developed out of the kind of Hebrew found in the Bible, and that the catalysts for this development were those whose first language was Aramaic. I will now proceed to explain this more fully.

My hypothesis is that MH is the product of interference from Aramaic; more particularly, I argue that MH is the outcome of widespread non-native acquisition of Hebrew during a specific period in Jewish history, and I will presently offer an educated guess on when that specific period was. My thinking here has been influenced by recent research on contact linguistics, especially grammatical complexity and simplification as a result of certain kinds of language contact, in particular the approach of John McWhorter (2007: 5), who says:

Wherever [natural linguistic] complexity is radically abbreviated overall rather than in scattered, local fashion, this is not just sometimes, but *always* caused by a sociohistorical situation in which non-native acquisition of the language was widespread enough that grammar was transmitted to new generations in a significantly simplified form. (Emphasis in original.)

Some of the issues raised here have appeared previously with different languages. A few decades ago, historical linguists of English discussed the “creole hypothesis” of the origin of Middle English, and ultimately decided that, although Middle English was *not* a creole, there were “creole-like” features to Middle English. These continue to be discussed—particularly, the twin processes of simplification (loss of features) and of admixture from contact languages, both of which apparently stem from non-native acquisition (Danchev 1997). A similar debate followed Kees Versteegh’s theory of the genesis of the colloquial Arabic dialects from language contact (see most recently Versteegh 2004).

The details that I focus on below are ways in which MH is simpler than BH, that is, cases where MH has lost features that were present in BH. There is more to MH than just simplification, but simplification is important. Simplification, ironically, is a complex notion,<sup>6</sup> but I hope that the general picture will be clear as the exposition proceeds.

### *An Approach Through Contact Linguistics*

Aramaic was a key element in giving MH the morphosyntactic shape that it has. Because Geiger had emphasized the role of Aramaic, those who opposed him often minimized it; but no one has denied that Aramaic was involved in some way. Even Segal admitted that MH was “greatly influenced” by Aramaic (1927: 9), although he walks back this admission a few pages later by saying that “educated Judeans” used Aramaic only “occasionally, and not habitually” (1927: 13). E. Y. Kutscher, on the other hand, stressed the Aramaic element and said “we might even be tempted to say that MH was a mixed Aramaic–Hebrew language” (1982: 117). The extent of Aramaic influence on MH is still debated, but no one denies that there was significant contact between the two languages.

What do we mean when we say a language is affected or changed by contact? Contact linguistics has made great strides recently in the understanding of just what is involved when we talk about “contact,” and just what happens to languages in the minds, mouths, and communities of the bilingual speakers where contact occurs. Schematically, in every change due to contact, there are two languages, a Source (or

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<sup>6</sup> Notions of “simplicity” in language are discussed by McWhorter (2007: 21-50) and Trudgill (2011: 20-26).



donor) Language (SL), from which “language material” is transferred, and a Recipient Language (RL), to which it is transferred.

The kinds of change that come out of contact situations, according to recent studies, depends crucially on the “agentivity” in the situations; that is, who is doing the transferring, the speakers of the RL or the speakers of the SL? If the native speakers of the RL are choosing to transfer “language material” from the SL, then we have “borrowing”; if the native speakers of the SL are transferring the material into the RL, then we have “interference” (Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 35-64; Winford 2003).

A key advance has been the realization that “borrowing” and “interference” (or substratum influence) have different typical outcomes. In the words of Donald Winford, “the definitive characteristic of borrowing is that it leads to little, if any modification of the RL structure” (2003: 143), while interference<sup>7</sup> “can significantly affect the structure and general character of the SL” (ibid.). By “structure” here is meant primarily phonology and syntax, and not lexicon and morphology.

My hypothesis is that, while borrowing has had an effect on Hebrew, which is the RL in this scenario, the presence of Aramaic interference was pivotal in the genesis of Mishnaic Hebrew. After the exilic period, there were several generations of native Hebrew speakers who acquired Aramaic as a second language and incorporated a fair amount of Aramaic lexical material into their version of Hebrew, and by lexical material I mean loanwords, calques, and multi-word expressions. This was “borrowing” in the sense just described. Although it affected the Hebrew lexicon, it had little effect on the overall structure of the language.

But also, sometime during the post-exilic period, the other major kind of language change through contact occurred—interference. Here, instead of native Hebrew speakers incorporating, from their second language, Aramaic lexical material into their first language, we have native Aramaic speakers acquiring Hebrew as a second language, and the version of Hebrew that they created in the course of this second language acquisition process became Mishnaic Hebrew.

An imperfectly acquired second language has structural characteristics that are often very much like those of the native language of the learners (the SL), both in phonology (the dreaded “foreign accent”) and in sentence structure, semantics, and overall “feel.” When the learning process goes on all the way to its desired end—to completion, so to speak, when the second language is wholly or “perfectly” acquired—

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<sup>7</sup> Winford calls it “imposition,” following Van Coetsem (1988).

these transferred characteristics disappear or diminish, and the acquired language—the RL of our scenario—bears few traces of its passage through the acquisition process. However, if the second language is never perfectly acquired, and if this “imperfectly learned” variety becomes the possession of an entire community, and if this community is large enough relative to the native speakers of the RL—then the RL will likely be permanently affected by this second-language variety, phonologically and structurally. It will be acquired in turn as a native variety of the RL and its characteristics will be transmitted generationally.

This may seem like a lot of “ifs,” but the thing has happened repeatedly in the history of languages; English, for one, has been greatly affected by substratum interference from languages with which it has been in contact (see McWhorter 2007: 59-103), and so have other “world languages,” such as Mandarin and the colloquial Arabic dialects.<sup>8</sup> Interference is well documented in languages like Ethiopic Semitic (with Cushitic substratum) and Afrikaans (Portuguese Creole substratum, see Thomason & Kaufman 1988: 251-255). The crucial factors, to repeat, are that (1) the RL is acquired as a second language by adults and (2) that there is a large population of these non-native adult learners and (3) that the acquisition remains “imperfect,” in the sense that the second language variety incorporates core structural features of the SL replacing those of the RL.<sup>9</sup> Most importantly, in some interference situations, not only are some SL features transferred, but some RL features are “lost,” that is, are never learned at all, particularly those that have no analogue in the SL.

The most extreme version of interference in this “lost features” sense is pidginization and its sequel, creolization. In a pidgin situation, language groups in contact develop a radically reduced common language—that is, a pidgin—that is not a true genetic descendant of any of the native languages in contact. If the pidgin is adopted as a native language and is acquired as a first language by a new generation, then it becomes a creole. The origin I am proposing for Mishnaic Hebrew is *not* pidginization or creolization. I do not believe that MH developed from a pidgin. Nevertheless, the process I envision does entail noticeable *loss* of structural features, as in pidginization, and not just *replacement* of features, as in “standard” interference.

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<sup>8</sup> Kees Versteegh’s hypothesis of the genesis of the colloquial Arabic dialects out of Classical Arabic through pidginization, followed by creolization, followed by decreolization, is similar in some respects to what I propose here for Mishnaic Hebrew (Versteegh 1984). His later revised theory (Versteegh 2004) is even more similar to mine.

<sup>9</sup> Or disproportionately favors RL structural features that are similar to SL features.

The resulting language is still “genetically” Hebrew, but is simplified in comparison to the parent version.

This interference process, therefore, falls somewhere in between regular interference and pidginization. Peter Trudgill calls the resulting languages creoloids (2011: 68), and John Holm “partially restructured languages” (2003). But I prefer the more descriptive, if unwieldy, nomenclature of John McWhorter (2007: 268), who calls these varieties “Non-hybrid Conventionalized Second Languages” or NCSL’s: Non-hybrid, because they are neither pidgins nor creoles; conventionalized second languages, because they originated in non-native acquisition but have been adopted by the native speaker community.

### *Simplification in Mishnaic Hebrew*

I now want to describe some ways in which MH has lost features of the parent language, along paths of simplification that are common in such situations. After that, I want to indulge in some informed speculation about the sociohistorical background that may have provided the setting for this process.

I will confine myself to the consideration of three separate “modules” of the verbal system of Biblical Hebrew and discuss how they were changed or simplified in Mishnaic Hebrew. These modules are (1) the infinitive absolute; (2) the system of volitives; and (3) the system of verbal conjugations.

### *Infinitive Absolute*

I begin with the infinitive absolute. As is well-known, BH has two infinitives, the infinitive construct and the infinitive absolute. The infinitive construct is more common and can serve as verbal complement or adjunct, like the English infinitive, and can combine with prepositions, and be inflected with pronominal suffixes. The infinitive absolute, on the other hand, does none of these things, and has a number of functions which are difficult to unite under a common flag. The main ones are as follows:

- (a) it serves as *nomen actionis*, naming the bare verbal action;
- (b) it functions as an auxiliary verb in certain constructions, conveying the notion of simultaneous action (e.g., הלך ונסע), or with the root הלך, increased action of stative verbs (הלך וחסר);

(c) the so-called “tautological infinitive,” in close association with a finite verb of the same root and (usually) *binyan*, the function of which is hard to define rigorously; the traditional description of Gesenius is that this “strengthen[s] the verbal idea,” and “emphasize[s] either the certainty ... or the forcibleness and completeness of an occurrence” (GKC §113n). Although many of these occurrences (which account for more uses of the infinitive absolute than any other use) in fact seem to have a connection with the modality of the main verb (see Kim 2009), others seem merely to add expressiveness or “mirativity” to the predication;

(d) as the verbal head of its own clause, which is coordinated with a preceding clause headed by a finite verb, expressing simultaneous action by the same agent;

(e) as an imperative, often expressing an ongoing action.

Two further features of this category should be noted: (1) that in prose texts, most occurrences of the infinitive absolute are in quoted speech, not in narrative exposition; and (2) the morphology displays some inconsistencies; for instance, the Niphʿal infinitive absolute attests the forms *niqtōl*, *hiqqōtēl*, and *hiqqōtōl*, and for final-weak verbs, *niḡlō* (1 Sam. 2:27), *niḡlōt* (2 Sam. 6:20), *hinnōqē* (Jer 25:29); for the Piʿel, the forms *qattēl*, *qattōl*, and *qittēl* are attested.

Now, for our exposition, the important fact is that the Infinitive Absolute is completely absent in Mishnaic Hebrew.<sup>10</sup> Segal attributes this to “natural decay” (1927: 166), but this expression reflects an old-fashioned, naive view of language change. Languages do not decay, but they change, and for identifiable reasons. The infinitive absolute, after all, lasted a long time, and the form is attested in several of the sister languages of Biblical Hebrew (Akkadian, Phoenician, Old Aramaic, Ugaritic). It was not prone to “decay.” As noted, most of its occurrences are in literary depictions of conversational Biblical Hebrew, so it seems to have been (or felt to have been) natural in speech.

However, a number of its features make it hard to acquire for adult learners. First, it is *opaque* in that the form has no unified function, but a variety of uses hard to bring together under a single rubric; they have to be added separately, as it were, to the repertoire. If the various functions of the infinitive absolute were not “covered” by other forms and constructions in BH, then a learner would still have to acquire them, even imperfectly; but in fact most of its functions are also *redundant*. There are other *nomen actionis* patterns, including forms that are *only* used for *nomina actionis*,

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<sup>10</sup> That is, as a category; remnants of the old infinitive absolute remain as adverbs (e.g., *harbē*) or *nomina actionis* of the form *heqtēl*.

such as אֶכְלֶה; other, analytic, ways of expressing or emphasizing modality, including, eventually, “dedicated” lexemes such as חַיִּב. “obligated,” etc.; e.g., the Biblical מוֹת יוֹמָת, “he must be put to death” is expressed by the Mishnaic חַיִּב מִיָּתָה; the continuation of a finite verb is more normally done by another finite verb<sup>11</sup>; the “continuous imperative” is, to use McWhorter’s terminology (2007: 21), a “semantic overspecification,” since the continuousness of the command can be recovered from either the semantics of the verb or from context. If we add to this the morphological irregularity of some of its forms, as noted above, then we can see that the infinitive absolute had the traits—opacity, redundancy, and irregularity—that made it a natural target for elimination under the impact of widespread acquisition of Hebrew by adult learners. My proposal is that these learners were native speakers of Aramaic, a language that (in its koineized form) had no morphosyntactic category corresponding to the infinitive absolute.

### *Volitives*

The second module I wish to discuss is a particular marked subset of the volitive forms; by “volitives” I mean the jussive, cohortative, and imperative moods.<sup>12</sup> The volitive system in BH survives in MH only in attenuated form.

Take, for instance, the so-called “long imperative.” In BH, the m.sg. imperative form can be expanded by the addition of the “paragogic” morpheme *-ō* (הָ), for example, *qūm* “arise!” becomes *qūmō*; *lēk* “go!” becomes *ləkō*; *ʔēkōl* “eat!” becomes *ʔəklō*, etc. There is no agreement either on the origin or function of this additional morpheme.<sup>13</sup> Stephen Fassberg (followed by Jan Joosten) proposes that the final *-ō* is derived from an original ventive morpheme *-am*, as in Akkadian, and means that the desired action is “directed towards, or performed on behalf of the speaker.”<sup>14</sup> Others,

<sup>11</sup> See A. Rubinstein (1952: 363), who says of the infinitive absolute used as a finite form, “its function appears to be redundant.”

<sup>12</sup> I distinguish volitives both morphologically and semantically from modals, as follows, and forgive the jargon. Modals in Hebrew (expressed by the *yiqṭōl* form) I take to have mainly *assertive* or *constative* force, with reference to the kinds of obligation (deontic, including permission) or certainty (epistemic, including possibility) asserted by the speaker; volitives (jussive, cohortative, imperative) I take to have mainly *directive* force, with reference to the will (wishes, hopes, commands, requests) of the speaker. Modal *yiqṭol* can acquire directive force via pragmatic inferencing, but it is not marked for volitivity.

<sup>13</sup> The following discussion is indebted to Dallaire (2014: 63-72).

<sup>14</sup> Quotation from Dallaire (2014: 68), but the source of the quotation is not clear (perhaps Fassberg).

including S. Kaufman, T. Lambdin, and J. Blau, believe that the morpheme is a remnant of the energetic morpheme *-anna*, and see it as a marker of politeness and deference, akin to saying “please.”<sup>15</sup> Still others believe that the long form is only stylistic variation, and makes no difference to the meaning (Dallaire 2014: 69). My own position is that Fassberg has rightly understood the usage of the form, and that the long imperative is marked for the “speaker’s benefit.” The fact that the short or default form can also be used for the “speaker’s benefit” (Dallaire 2014: 71) is irrelevant, since the marking is optional.

But the long imperative is completely absent in the Mishnah, except for quotations from Scripture. In light of the previous discussion, it can be easily seen that the long imperative, regardless of where we come down on its specific meaning, is a “semantic overspecification,” in McWhorter’s words (2007), whether it refers to the speaker’s benefit, or adds politeness. It is also a redundancy, in that there are common lexical ways of expressing those categories. As with the infinitive absolute, it was a natural target for acquisitional simplification, especially on the part of adult speakers of Aramaic, which had no equivalent marking in its volitive system.

The “cohortative” form is similar in some ways to the long imperative; its distinctive feature is the presence of final *-ā* on first-person *yiqṭāl* forms, yielding (e.g.) *ʔeqḥā* from *ʔeqqaḥ* “I will take”, *nimmālā* from *nimmālēt* “we will escape,” etc. It too may have been derived from the energetic *-anna* or a primitive *yaqtula* proto-form (Dallaire 2014: 110). It expresses simply the speaker’s desire to perform a certain action and (in the plural) that others may join the action.<sup>16</sup> In later texts, in the so-called pseudo-cohortative, it becomes common to add the *-ā* morpheme to the preterite (*wayyiqṭāl*), a sign that in Late Biblical Hebrew the added syllable was taken to be an optional elaboration and nothing more.<sup>17</sup>

The cohortative is not used in MH, except in quotations of Biblical texts. Here, too, is a simplification. Since the modal use of the first-person imperfect *yiqṭāl*

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<sup>15</sup> Dallaire (2014: 68). The ventive *-am* and energetic *-anna* probably go back to the same Proto-Semitic morpheme, see Hasselbach (2006).

<sup>16</sup> Dallaire quotes Joosten that the cohortative expresses “the intention to act when the speaker is able ..., but a request for help or permission when he [sic] is not” (Dallaire 2014: 111). This boils down to simple volition, the desire to act; the inference of either intention or request for help or permission is a pragmatic inference from the expression of the desire. See Joüon-Muraoka (2006: 346).

<sup>17</sup> Korchin (2012) argues that the pseudo-cohortative has a “centrifugal” nuance (motion away from deictic centre) but I find this unconvincing; but if true, it is a clear semantic overspecification.

regularly expresses “commissive” modality (the commitment to perform a certain action), the further nuance that the speaker has the desire to perform that act is an unnecessary semantic elaboration, and may be left to pragmatic inferencing or contextual recovery. The cohortative form was not used in Aramaic,<sup>18</sup> and adult Aramaic-speaking learners of Hebrew would have had difficulty in acquiring competence in such a delicate nuance (if indeed the nuance had survived in Hebrew at all; the pseudo-cohortative suggests that it survived only as an optional “empty” morpheme).

Under this heading, I end with the jussive. The category itself survives in MH, and indeed the negative command, consisting of the negative particle  $\text{לֹא}$  plus the *yiqṭōl* form, is probably more widely used than the construction  $\text{לֹא}$  plus the *yiqṭōl* form (the so-called “prohibitive” form). What do not survive in MH, however, are most morphologically marked forms of the jussive. Indeed, even in BH, the jussive is in a majority of cases formally the same as the imperfect, but there are significant exceptions: (1) singular Final-Weak verbs (which apocopate the final syllable in all stems), (2) singular Hiph‘ils of all roots (which change the quality of the final vowel from *hireq-yodh* to *šere*), (3) singular Hollow Verbs in the Qal (which also change the quality of the final vowel, from *shuruq* to *holem*), (4) pronominal suffixes (which do not appear with *nun energicum* preceding). Outside of these exceptions, in BH, only the syntactic context or the presence of the negator  $\text{לֹא}$  indicate that the form is a jussive.

In MH, however, the formally marked jussive forms have diminished, and the imperfect forms have almost levelled through the BH jussive paradigm—even after  $\text{לֹא}$ , judging from the vocalized manuscripts, e.g.,  $\text{אַל תִּדִּין אֶת חֲבִירְךָ}$ , “do not judge your fellow” (m. Avot 2:4), instead of  $\text{אַל תִּדִּין}$ ;  $\text{אַל תִּחַזֵּק}$  (m. Avot 2:8) instead of  $\text{אַל תִּחַזֵּק}$ ;  $\text{אַל תַּעֲשֶׂה$ , “let him not do it” (m. Hal 2:3) instead of  $\text{אַל יַעֲשֶׂה}$ . Nevertheless, we also have the phrase  $\text{אַל תַּעֲשֶׂה}$  “do not make” (m. Avot 1:8) with apocopation (var. lect.  $\text{אַל תַּעֲשֶׂה}$ ), and other examples that are more in keeping with the BH pattern (see also m. Avot 4:22). It is possible that the Hebrew jussives had already undergone morphological leveling without the stimulus of Aramaic contact; but given the other indications of contact-driven impact on the volitive system, it is likely that the Aramaic substratum

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<sup>18</sup> This requires some qualification; there may be sporadic or vestigial traces, but they are not systemic.

gave this process added impetus. Removal of irregularity is one by-product of the kind of contact we are proposing.

### *Verbal Conjugations*

The last verbal “module” I shall consider, although briefly, is the overall structure of the conjugational system. As is well known, the BH finite verbal system is based, morphologically, on one principal opposition, viz., *qāṭal* — *yiqṭōl* (*olim* perfect — imperfect; or suffix conjugation — prefix conjugation) supplemented by a subsystem of “consecutive” forms, of almost identical inflection, usually with initial *waw*, i.e., *wayyiqṭōl* — *we-qāṭal*. There is much debate about what the basic opposition is meant to signify—tense, aspect, modality, reality status (i.e., realis/irrealis), or some combination of the above. However, there is broad agreement on certain facts: that *qāṭal* generally refers to past actions, that *yiqṭōl* is principally used for modal or future actions, as well as the general present and past habitual. The *wayyiqṭōl*, or preterite as I prefer to call it, is a survival—a retention of a narrative past form from the ancestor language, while the *we-qāṭal* (or modal perfect) is an innovation—a grammaticalized construction<sup>19</sup> (apparently peculiar to the Canaanite dialects) that occupies essentially the same semantic space as *yiqṭōl*.

Significance	Main System	Subsystem
past / perfective / realis	<i>qāṭal</i>	<i>wayyiqṭōl</i>
future / modal / imperfective / irrealis	<i>yiqṭōl</i>	<i>we-qāṭal</i>

Hence the semantics of the two systems are essentially the same; what the consecutive subsystem is for is described differently. Most would say that *wayyiqṭōl* is used to signify sequential actions in a narrative, although e.g. R. Buth (1992) speaks of “continuity” rather than sequence. Likewise *we-qāṭal* signifies sequence (temporal or logical) in a future or modal series of actions. J. Cook (2004) dissents from this view

<sup>19</sup> Following J. Cook (2008; see also Waltke & O'Connor 1990); others believe that *we-qāṭal* is formed analogically after the pattern of *wayyiqṭōl*. This would entail that dialects with *we-qāṭal* must also have had *wayyiqṭōl*; but Phoenician has *we-qāṭal* but does not have *wayyiqṭōl*. Note also that some Old Aramaic dialects have (*way*)*yiqṭōl*, but not *we-qāṭal*.



and argues that *wayyiqṭōl* is marked for discourse foreground, while *we-qṭal* has other uses and only a limited correlation with foregrounding.

It is no part of my purpose to settle these questions; rather, to point out that the BH system of verbal conjugations displays a complexity and redundancy that is unusual by comparison to its sister languages. It is a classic example of *overspecification* (McWhorter 2007: 21), in that the subsystem, at least in prose, obligatorily marks sequence (or foreground), a discourse category not normally marked cross-linguistically; it is also an example of syntactic *redundancy*, in that sequentiality in narrative or instruction is already sufficiently marked by Verb–Subject word order, and in that the same temporal–aspectual territory is covered by two conjugations with only a single (minor) feature differentiating them. If, as seems probable (Kawashima 2010), *wayyiqṭōl* and *we-qṭal* were reanalyzed at some point as synchronic forms of *yiqṭōl* and *qṭal*, respectively, then we can add *opacity*: there is no form-function pairing of *yiqṭōl* and *qṭal* except by clause configuration.

The MH verbal system has completely dispensed with the consecutive subsystem, and displays a tense-prominent system of conjugations: *qṭal* for past, *yiqṭōl* for modal-future, and the active participle *qōṭēl* for present (actual, general, and progressive). Again I argue that the slimmed-down system of MH is due to widespread acquisition of Hebrew by adult native Aramaic speakers; the Aramaic system of conjugations, in fact, is very like the MH system, which reflects both simplification of the BH system and “transfer” of the Aramaic system.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> At some point, but not here, there will have to be a more detailed discussion of what preconditions in Hebrew allowed this process to happen. Segal (1927: 73) says that “the more *convenient* construction with the simple tenses had survived in the every-day speech side by side with the *more difficult* construction by means of the consecutive tenses” (emphasis mine) in the “literary dialect.” He denies any Aramaic influence. But then why did the verbal system simplify? It begs the question to say that one construction was convenient and the other difficult. If they ever co-existed in speech at all, why did that change? Along the same lines, Joüon-Muraoka say: “The later books show clear signs of a gradual collapse or deterioration of the classical tense system and an incipient change in the direction of MH” (2006: 377). Why did the classical tense system “collapse”? Earlier they said: “The use by Hebrew writers of the *wayyiqtol* form, and thus of the energetic Waw, was so broad that the original force of the form was gradually lost and decreasingly felt. This misuse has led to the form falling into desuetude, a development which was no doubt reinforced by the influence of Aramaic” (p. 367). The first sentence is almost a tautology; to say that the use of *wayyiqtol* was “broad” is to say little more than that “the original force” was “lost.” However, the idea that Aramaic aided or accelerated a process that was already under way (regardless of cause) is consistent with the hypothesis of substratum

These three BH verbal modules, then, present clear signs of complexity, considered in themselves and from the viewpoint of adult second language learning, and, I argue, were natural targets for simplification in the course of widespread non-native acquisition. The case for such acquisition, I should say, is not based exhaustively on these three cases, but on a good many more cases of contact phenomena, including syntactic phenomena at the phrase level<sup>21</sup> and clause level,<sup>22</sup> to say nothing of various borrowings, calques, and lexical reductions.<sup>23</sup>

### *A Possible Historical Scenario*

I now want to consider some possible historical scenarios that might have produced the sociohistorical situation that, I argue, was the matrix for the genesis of MH. We are looking for a period wherein many adult Aramaic speakers might have been acquiring Hebrew, because there was strong pressure to do so, and the number of these speakers was great enough to eventually affect the native speaker variety of Hebrew. I will consider three possible periods, in increasing order of likelihood: (1) the pre-exilic period, (2) the post-exilic Persian period, and (3) the Hasmonean period.

### *Pre-Exilic Period*

I begin with the pre-exilic period, because it has been claimed, mainly by Gary Rendsburg, that the origins of MH lie in this period, principally in the northern kingdom, as I noted above, as I also noted the almost millennium-length chronological gap in evidence separating Northern Hebrew and MH. I will set that aside for now. As concerns Aramaic contact, it has been proposed that dialect geography, i.e., the contiguity of the northern kingdom to the Aramean kingdoms accounts for the similarities to Aramaic—although, confusingly, Rendsburg denies “Aramaic

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interference presented here. (Cf. the notion of “positive transfer” in second language acquisition studies.)

<sup>21</sup> E.g., the “redesign” of the genitive phrase to include analytic constructions alongside the construct. For further examples, see my paper “The Aramaic Influence on Mishnaic Hebrew: Borrowing or Interference?” (forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> E.g., the use of װ as a complementizer.

<sup>23</sup> By lexical reductions I mean that, when BH offers alternative synonyms, the one surviving in MH is often the one cognate to Aramaic. E.g., BH ׀א and ׀ע, both meaning “with” > MH ׀ע only (< Aramaic, which has no cognate to ׀א).

influence.”<sup>24</sup> However, there does not seem to be any reason to believe that there was strong and widespread cultural pressure on Arameans to acquire Hebrew in this period. No doubt there was bilingualism in border areas; the possible outcome of such Hebrew-Aramaic contact can perhaps be seen in the Transjordanian (Gileadite) Tell Deir ‘Allā plaster text. But its language is very different from MH.

Furthermore, it is insufficient just to point to contact with “Aramaic” as if any Aramaic will do. The kind of Aramaic that evidently served as a substratum influence on Hebrew was not the Old Aramaic of the inscriptions from the 9th-7th centuries BCE, but rather the international *lingua franca* variety that arose in the age of the big empires—the Assyrian, the Neo-Babylonian, and preeminently the Persian. I refer to Imperial Aramaic, or Official Aramaic.

It is important to note that the elevation of Aramaic to this high rank did not leave it unchanged. Imperial Aramaic, as it seems, was not the outgrowth or daughter language of any one of the Old Aramaic dialects known to us. Instead, Imperial Aramaic developed as a compromise or combination of the features of several dialects—that is, a *koine*. The process of “koineization” is defined by Donald Tuten (2007:185) as “a process of mixing of dialects ... which leads to the rapid formation of a new dialect or koine, characterized by mixing, levelling and simplification of features found in the dialects which formed part of the original mix.”

For Aramaic, this “mixing, levelling, and simplification” took place on a number of levels, including phonology, morphology, and syntax.<sup>25</sup> Although local forms of

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<sup>24</sup> Rendsburg (1992: 234). He obviously envisions a *Sprachbund* of some kind between Aramaic, Northern Hebrew, and Phoenician; but a *Sprachbund* comes about via contact and extensive bilingualism, not by geography alone.

<sup>25</sup> At the level of phonology, the phonemic inventory was reduced and simplified by the merger of the interdental stops /ð θ ʈ/ with their dental counterparts /d t ʈ/, of /š/ with /s/, and of the reflex of /ṣ/ represented by *qoph* with /ʕ/. Morphologically, the fem. pl. pronouns and inflections were dropped in favor of a generic use of the m.pl. The Eastern proximate demonstrative אלה “these” was generalized throughout, in preference to the Western אלן, as well as the 3 m.pl. demon. pron. הו instead of הם. The marker of the definite direct object in the West, אית, was dropped in favour of the expansion of the preposition ל. The various forms of the prefix conjugation, namely the imperfect, jussive, and preterite were also simplified: the preterite, peculiar to the Southern dialects, was dropped, being replaced in most of its uses by the suffix-conjugation; while the jussive paradigm with *lamedh* preformative, peculiar to the Eastern dialects, was simplified by levelling through the *yodh*-preformative of the imperfect as in the West. In addition, the pattern of the *nomen actionis*/infinitive, *mqtl*, was generalized, and the Western infinitive form without preformative *mem* was left out. Syntactically, the analytic form of the genitive noun phrase—i.e., its expansion by the use of the

Aramaic continued to be spoken, as later dialectal developments demonstrate, the Imperial Aramaic *koine* was very influential and left its mark on all the later Aramaic dialects, and also on Hebrew in the form of MH. The Aramaic substratum of MH was specifically affected by this *koine*, which fixes, within broad limits, the time of MH's origin. It had to be after the formation of Imperial Aramaic.

### *Persian Period*

I, therefore, turn to the post-exilic period. The reconstruction of the language situation in Judah in the Persian period (ca. 538 BCE–333 BCE) has been a battleground of competing views. Geiger, who, as remarked, argued that MH was a rabbinic scholarly language, believed that the Jews of the Second Temple period used only Aramaic and no longer spoke Hebrew at all (1845: 1). Although most have abandoned this view, it is still held by some European scholars, most notably Klaus Beyer, Ingo Kottsieper, and Holger Gzella. Beyer (1984) places the end of Hebrew as a spoken language around the year 400 BCE, the same year Segal (1927: 1) picked as marking the beginning of the use of Mishnaic Hebrew as a spoken language.<sup>26</sup> Most today, if not following Segal's exact periodization, would still agree broadly that MH developed sometime in the Second Temple period. But when?

The Persian period at first glance is a likely place to find the sociohistorical situation we are looking for. The province of Yehud under Persia was small, and the population was also small, although the evidence of archaeology is that it began to increase around 450 BCE. It seems to me that Hebrew survived in this small area as a local dialect of both returnees and those who never went into exile. There is some epigraphic evidence of the use of Hebrew in the Persian period (bullae and seals), and one cannot set aside the evidence that Hebrew was definitely in use after this period, which is hard to explain unless it had been used uninterruptedly.

The literary evidence is also important, especially the Biblical books of Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles, Esther, Qoheleth, and the Song of

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particle וי (= די)—was adopted from the Eastern dialects to supplement the construct phrase. Also, the development of the verb הוה “to be” as an auxiliary combined with the active participle in Imperial Aramaic—the so-called periphrastic construction—reflects the integration of the participle into the verbal system, an apparent innovation in Imperial Aramaic. The more flexible word order of the Eastern dialects, reflecting perhaps an Akkadian or Persian substratum, also became the rule in Imperial Aramaic.

<sup>26</sup> To be more exact, he specifies “400-300 B.C.E.” as the beginning of the MH period.

Songs. Although the latter texts could be set aside as “literary” productions, and not evidence for the local vernacular, this overlooks two facts: (1) that some of the literary texts bear the marks of “popular” literature, that is, intended for oral performance and distribution (especially the prophetic books, Esther, and the Song) and (2) there is no evidence that the growth in the use and prestige of Aramaic in general necessarily led to the demise of local languages. During the Persian period and the zenith of Imperial Aramaic, we also have epigraphic texts in Phoenician, Akkadian, Egyptian, Lydian, “Arabian,” and Persian—showing that Aramaic, although it undoubtedly was adopted as a mother-tongue by many, did not have to displace local languages.

Therefore there is no reason to assume that Hebrew was “replaced” by Aramaic. There is another factor to take into consideration. Although the isolation of Judah, and the Judahite dialect of Biblical Hebrew, came to an end in the exilic and post-exilic periods, there is ample sociolinguistic precedent for the maintenance of a minority language by a close-knit social group (in our own day, witness the survival of Basque, Frisian, and Welsh). The post-exilic community, from all that can be determined, was highly conscious of its status as the “remnant of the Lord,” and as the bearers of the pre-exilic Mosaic tradition to the next generation. Much of the post-exilic biblical literature was in fact designed to preserve and enhance this consciousness of special peoplehood, and it succeeded to a degree unexampled elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern history. This had to have fostered the survival of Hebrew in Judah. In my view, Hebrew survived, and, judging from what evidence we have, it was Biblical Hebrew (or something like), not yet Mishnaic Hebrew.

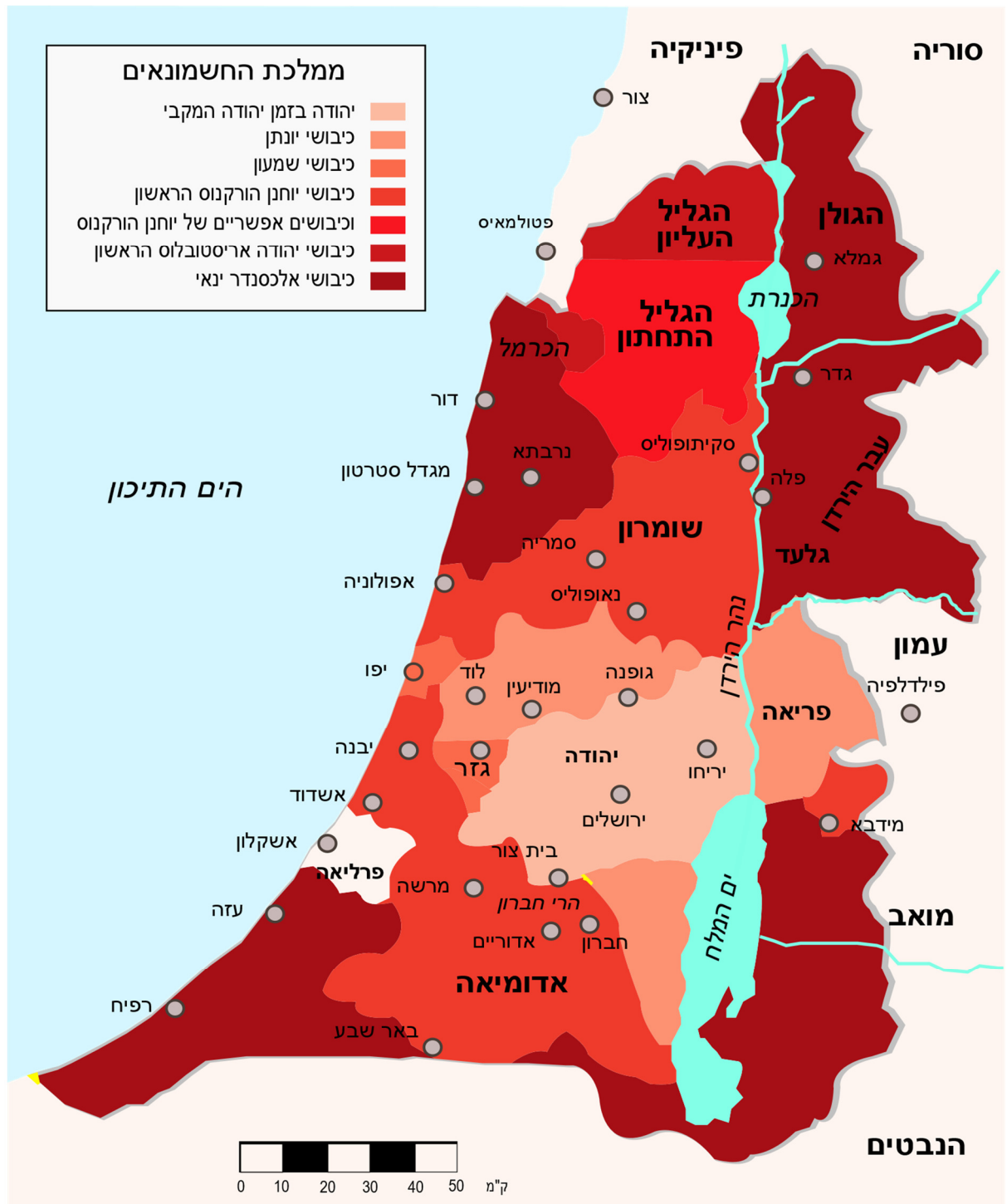
Aramaic was an important part of the cultural matrix in the Persian period, and was the language of wider communication both without (Elephantine) and within the province of Judah. Bilingualism must have been common, at least in some social groups. Could this period, then, be the one we are looking for?

It could be, but I think not. Although one of our criteria is met—that the number of people whose first or dominant language was Aramaic, at least outside of Judah, vastly outnumbered the native Hebrew speakers, it is difficult to see how there could have been any strong cultural pressure towards widespread non-native acquisition of Hebrew. All the pressure, in fact, must have been in the other direction; that is, towards second-language acquisition of Aramaic on the part of Hebrew speakers, not vice versa. And indeed our evidence, in the Persian era post-exilic Biblical texts, is evidence of borrowing. Hebrew speakers were the transfer agents of a number of

Aramaic words and calques into Hebrew literature, but there is little evidence of Aramaic structural interference (as we have defined the term). The “complicated” verbal system and the volitives remained intact, and the use of the infinitive absolute, if anything, expanded. The Judeans were trying to survive in a hostile environment, and they maintained their language; but outside of their own small cultural sphere they had no socio-cultural clout that would draw others to add it to their linguistic repertoire.

### *Hasmonean Period*

I come finally to the Hellenistic period, and especially the era of the Hasmoneans within that period. Probably we should look here for the sociohistorical situation most conducive to widespread non-native acquisition of Hebrew, for two reasons: (1) this era, particularly through the Hasmonean policy of territorial expansion and Judaization, saw a region-wide expansion of Judean population and imposition of Judean institutions outside of Judea proper; and therefore (2) it is the only period in which there was not only religious, but also social, political, and legal motivation for acquisition of the Hebrew language among the non-Judean populations now under Hasmonean control. The map given on the next page shows the extent of Judean expansion in the Late Hellenistic period:



As you can see, the pre-expansion territory of Judah was quite small, and was enlarged a bit by Jonathan and Simon. During the 30-year reign of John Hyrcanus (134-104 BCE), the territory of Idumea, Philistia, parts of Transjordan and the Coastal Plain, and Samaria were conquered—and not simply conquered, but forcibly converted to Judaism. Aristobulus added the territory of Galilee and Iturea, and after

him, Jannaeus annexed significant Transjordanian territory, including Perea, Galaaditis, and coastal territory formerly in the Phoenician cultural sphere.

It is reasonable to think that such a rapid expansion had linguistic repercussions. Many of the lands added to the Hasmonean state were inhabited by Syrophone Gentiles, and we have concrete epigraphic evidence of the prior use of Aramaic in the Negev (Maresha, Khirbet el-Kom) and in Samaria (inscriptions). We have admittedly no evidence on the language policy of the Hasmoneans, if any, but the forcible propagation of Judaism and the Jewish law, as well as the presence of new Judean landowners, nobility, and settlers in non-Judean areas, I argue, led to a Hasmonean edition of an old sociolinguistic story, in which acquiring the language of the new rulers became an attractive choice for adults of the region; and no doubt intermarriage of Judeans with non-Judean natives played a large role as well. It was at this point that Hebrew broke out of its status as a local ethnic language and became a prestige language for non-natives, at least regionally. The fact that Aramaic loanwords and calques were already present in the Hebrew of the conquerors facilitated its acquisition by Aramaic speakers.

At this point, the “creoloid” or conventionalized second-language Hebrew that arose out of this process quickly became a popular alternative vernacular. Although it did not succeed in ousting Aramaic as a language of wider communication, or Greek as the tongue of international high culture, it did apparently find a home among those who wished to signal strongly their adherence to the customs and values of Judaism. In Judea proper, it seems, “Old” Hebrew continued to be used for literature, and even for speech, but eventually it gave way to the more widely used conventionalized second language; which, after all, was Hebrew, too.

It seems probable that a true situation of diglossia was in place throughout Jewish Palestine by the time Herod died in 4 BCE—with a form of MH, now become a first language for many, used for the “low” functions of oral communication, and a form of BH used for the “high” functions of religion and literature (cf. Qumran Hebrew). How and where it shared these functions with Aramaic, as it seemingly did up to at least the second century CE, is a question that is difficult to answer. Ironically, MH would not become a literary language in its own right until the late second century CE, when it was once again ceasing to be anyone’s first language and was once again becoming “second-language Hebrew” used primarily by speakers of Jewish Aramaic and of Greek.



In closing, I want to emphasize that the description of MH as a “non-hybrid conventionalized second language” depends only on grammatical phenomena such as the ones I laid out earlier, as well as others, and not on the suggested historical context. That MH is a version of Hebrew produced in the post-exilic period by interference from Aramaic speakers is in principle a fact that can be demonstrated; that this may have happened in the Late Hellenistic period is only an educated guess.

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